

At Lexington



A Memorial Poem

By

Benjamin Gledde

AT LEXINGTON

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BENJAMIN SLEDD

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[This poem is selected from Mr. Sledd's forthcoming volume
"Old South Idylls"]

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TO
CLARENCE POE

CRITIC, FRIEND

WHO IS HIMSELF DOING MUCH TO BRING ABOUT THAT FINAL
TRIUMPH OF THE SOUTH SO CONFIDENTLY FORETOLD
AT THE CLOSE OF THIS POEM

NOTE

It was at the close of the seventies in Virginia that I gave up the struggle with sassafras bushes and crabgrass, worn-out soils and hopeless negro labor; sold a big slice of my world of useless land for the princely sum of three hundred dollars; and one fine September morning, with books and clothing packed in a pair of saddlebags, rode away on old Frank (*nomen carum et venerabile!*) across the counties to the Washington and Lee University.

At that time, with the James River Canal abandoned and the railroad still in the making,—there was only the highway from the north and from the south to bring students and cadets into Lexington. As I approached the town, therefore, I found the road full of pilgrims, bound for the University or for the Military Institute,—wealthy boys from the far south, whirling past behind gaily decorated teams; farmer lads with their fathers jogging along in rusty buggies; but old Frank and I had the prize until we overtook a sturdy fellow who had walked from southwest Virginia and was now trudging along barefooted, with his only pair of shoes slung over his shoulders. Of many such was the kingdom of learning in those days.

My first hours in Lexington were spent largely at the grave of Jackson and the tomb of Lee. Mine had been indeed not a journey but a pilgrimage.

B. S.

AT LEXINGTON

All day a pilgrim had I gone
Across Virginia's storied land,
The lure of "Lexington!"
Leading me ever on.
What though the land in ruins lay?
The autumn fields cropless and gray?—
From far and near that day
Undaunted mid defeat and shame,
The South's young manhood came,
No more at war's, but duty's proud command.

But night was now at hand,
And weary, travel-stained I stood
And from a hilltop's fringe of wood
On straggling spires and homes looked down.
And could it be, this little town,
The goal of life's dream-years?
Almost it moved to bitter tears
Such close should be to youth's glad quest.
And still I lingered by the way,
While fancy yearned to make the best
Of all that eye could see:
Close round the guardian mountains pressed;
Northward, the river darkling flowed;
And near, in cloistral quiet, showed
Those dreamed-of pillared walls, aglow
With the last light of day;
And there below,
Shadowed by many a tree,
The tomb of Lee.

O river, hills, and town,—that name
Has crowned you with a crown of flame!

To doubt and linger more what need?
Now to your longings give all speed,
O pilgrim. Yet 'twere meet
To go with naked feet,
For sacred is the ground you tread.
Around you are the mighty dead;
And where yon clustering marble gleams
Faint in the rising moon's first beams,
Great Stonewall sleeps his victor sleep.
But wander past and let him keep
His glory still a while unsung.
Blest was he that he died so young,—
So young the cause he glorified.
What if defeat had tried
That stern sad soul's unyielding pride?—
Victor he lived, victor he died.
Some day, O Muses, hither bring
Poet worthy his deeds to sing.

Yet victory
Alone makes not the great;
But victor over fate
Itself was Lee,
Who made defeat his perfect fame,
And taught us what the great may be.
Oh, holy are this hill and wood,
For here perhaps it was he stood,
When on that August day he came,
And gazed with kingly eyes upon
His little realm of Lexington.

And he whose hand had hurled
The thunderbolt and all but riven
The land in twain and given
Another nation to the world—
Put on the scholar's cap and gown :
Not worn as martyr's robe and crown
But with a high humility
Which taught us what the great can be.

But hasten down ; and leave the throng
To their own boyish ways, of song
And laughter. What have you,
O pilgrim, yet with these to do!
Still is your pilgrimage undone.
Each roving band of comrades shun ;
Down the dim street untended make,
Till from its lordly hilltop, bright
As a vision in the moon's full light,
The wide old pillared front shall break
Right on your startled gaze :

At last! At last!

Oh, not in vain
The yearnings of those unblest days
Forever now behind you cast!
For to a boy's untutored dreams
As grand the humble vision seems
As when of old a festal train
From far off isle amid the main,
Landing at holy Marathon,
Over Pentelicus all day have gone,
At sunset gain
Hymettus and the Attic plain,
And silently look down upon
The Parthenon! The Parthenon!

Oh, not in vain
The waiting of those patient days,
When from the jeering world apart,
Wandering in lonely ways,
You nursed the promise in your heart!
Deep in untroubled haunts of pine,
On fragrant needles stretched supine,
Reading the tales all but divine
As that divinest tale of long ago
Of Hector's might and Ilion's woe,—
Time's latest page of chivalry :
Grim Stonewall and his Ironsides,
Pickett's charge, and Stuart's rides,
And everywhere the soul of Lee.

But linger not, for nigh at hand
Moonlit and ivy-mantled stand
The chapel walls, and on the floor,
From oriel windows silvered o'er
With moonlight's unstained glory, see
The tomb of Lee.

Your pilgrimage at last is done :
The goal of life's dream-years is won !

Is it enough, enough, to stand
With duly folded hand
And reverent-bended head !
Kneel down and to the marble lay
Your lips and humbly pay
Meet reverence to the dead.

Good is it to be here.
O pilgrim, what have you to fear?
Though slowly hence the moonbeams glide
And all grows dark, and at your side
An awful presence stands.
Fear not, but mutely lift
Your suppliant hands
And beg the longed-for gift :—
Some day to come and lay
Tribute of deathless song—
Voiced alike by friends and foes—
Upon his tomb and somewhat pay
The debt a nation owes.—

(Oh, Chieftain, it was long,
So long ago, the gift I prayed,
And daily have my lips essayed
To keep the vow which then they made;
But toil and time work grievous wrong,
Stealing away the poet fire
And leaving but unquenched desire.
My chieftain, on your tomb today
Tribute of song I lay :
Not what I would but what I may.)

But now a waking bird has cried
“The dawn ! the dawn !” O pilgrim, rise
And hasten forth and take your place
Your toiling brother-man beside,
A new day’s radiance on your face,
A new day’s promise in your eyes.

And leave your Chieftain to his sleep :
His very name
Time's self will keep
In sacred trust.
Out of war's ruin, wrong, and shame,—
Just or unjust,—
The work of peace that here he wrought,
The patient, far-off ends he sought,
His ever-brightening star of fame,
In the long years to be,—
Our stern, high task before us set,
Our hands in love and duty met,—
Will lead his people yet
To victory.





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